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ABSTRACT

This digest, based on an extensive review of research on comprehensive school reform, presents a brief overview of the role of teachers in comprehensive schoolwide reform (CSR). CSR is most successful when schools have decision-making autonomy in administration and instruction. Teachers also prefer models that fit with the school's overall environment, staffing, and student population, and those that mesh with reforms already in progress. Teachers play a vital role in CSR implementation. Providing them with adequate resources for implementation and time for planning promotes their support. Some CSR models are very prescriptive, and provide curricula and assessments, while other models rely more on the school to develop materials that support the philosophy of the reform. Among the factors that facilitate implementation of reform efforts by teachers include provision by the designers of a structured curriculum, concrete examples of instructional practices reflecting the reform, and specific, practical mechanisms for achieving the higher standards established as a goal. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN URBAN SCHOOL REFORM

A central component of current efforts to improve schools is comprehensive schoolwide reform (CSR), which focuses on changing teaching and learning through schoolwide restructuring intended to impact all aspects of schooling. CSR models now in use around the country are demonstrating the importance of teachers' contributions both in effectively implementing a reform model and in using the model's instructional strategies to improve student achievement. This digest, based on an extensive review of research on comprehensive schoolwide reform, presents a brief overview of the role of teachers in CSR.

Factors Determining Teacher Commitment to Reform

Without the wide-scale commitment and involvement of the teachers in a school, implementation of CSR will likely be slow and incomplete, affecting only a few select teachers and their students instead of the whole school (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden, 1998; Timar, 1989). As evidence of the importance of teachers' active participation in program implementation, many programs require that at least 80 percent of the school's faculty vote for their model before they allow the school to adopt it (Stringfield, Ross, & Smith, 1996). Teachers who share a vision that large-scale fundamental changes in school structure and classroom practice are necessary to improve student outcomes are likely to support implementation of a model, as are those who see implementation of a model as a major and permanent initiative, instead of just another passing reform (Bodilly, 1998; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996).

Active participation in the choice of the whole-school reform design model to be used by their school increases teachers' commitment to the model. Teacher involvement in the selection process also increases the rate and success of CSR implementation (Bodilly, 1998). In fact, making teachers partners in the decision-making process from the outset creates a natural accountability that positively influences the implementation of the design and is essential to achieving successful classroom-level changes; teachers who, conversely, perceive top-down decision making are more apt to resist the restructuring effort (Ross et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1997). CSR is most successful when schools have decision-making autonomy in administration and instruction (Bodilly & Berends, 1999).

Good coordination of program curriculum with Federal, state, and district requirements, such as student assessments, increases a program's attractiveness to teachers. Whereas they may be supportive of the program's learning goals, teachers also need reassurance that using the model will not impede students' mastery of the skills required by state-mandated tests or prevent more basic instruction in academic skills that at-risk students need (Ross et al., 1997). Conventional standardized assessments do not cover many valued student outcomes, especially those emphasized by many reform models (e.g., higher-order thinking).

To determine how well a program meets its own student achievement goals, teachers can develop alternative assessments and/or can benchmark progress based on student outcomes such as higher attendance rates, lower dropout and discipline referral rates, and better student post-high school planning (Gonzalez & Tucker, 1996; MacMullen, 1996). In addition, many schools have obtained district waivers from traditional school requirements, but this only calls attention to the tension between standardized assessments and the curriculum and instructional methods of some CSR programs (Darling-Hammond,1997; Heady & Kilgore, 1996).

Teachers also prefer models that fit with the school's overall environment, staffing, and student population, and those that mesh with reforms already in process, thus increasing the coherence of the school's efforts, and requiring less change for them (Bodilly, 1996; Levin, 1995; Smith et al., 1997).

Teacher Role in Implementation

Schoolwide reform requires a new vision of professionalism, where teachers assume a major role and responsibility for the schools (Bodilly, 1996). It necessitates making fundamental changes in the way instruction is provided, and, usually, redefining roles and relationships, reconsidering allocation of control and resources, and managing conflict effectively (Timar, 1989). Implementation of the most ambitious models may extend over several years, depending on both school factors and the complexity of the model; it requires teachers to focus on multiple goals, such as governance changes, collaborative planning, and fundamental changes in curriculum and instruction.

Allocation of Time and Resources

Providing teachers with adequate resources for implementation, such as materials, professional development, and time for planning, promotes their support. Districts that give more money to schools for professional development and teacher planning tend to have better implemented CSR designs (Bodilly & Berends, 1999). Not only are resources important in themselves, but their allocation is a key mechanism by which teachers judge the commitment of the school's leadership to the reform (Bodilly, 1998).

Having adequate time for all the work involved has been a consistent and primary frustration for teachers trying to implement school reforms. They need time for training, curriculum development, preparation, and planning, and for interactions with other teachers. Some teachers have, in fact, noted that time for meeting as a team was critical to the model's effectiveness (Ross et al., 1997).

Allocation of adequate time for implementation has been problematic in restructuring schools, however, largely because it is difficult to predict the amount of time needed to adopt a schoolwide reform. Most schools underestimate the extent of change and staff involvement required to implement a design fully, and, thus, the amount of time for implementation and the cost of teachers' additional work (Ross et al., 1997).

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Professional Development

Professional development is at the heart of school change efforts. Its type, level, and quality are linked to successful implementation of CSR models (Muncey & McQuillan, 1996). The CSR model's design team needs to be actively involved at the school to address the fact that teachers in the same school vary significantly in the way and the extent that they implement the school's CSR model (Muncey & McQuillan, 1996). The team can also promote teachers' commitment and adjustment to the implementation of the selected reform model.

Team members provide training in instructional techniques; suggest new forms of interactions between parents, teachers, and students that promote cooperation and understanding; and, perhaps most important, establish collaborative opportunities for teachers (Ross et al., 1997). Some models provide development through regional facilities, others rely on design team personnel visits to the local site, and still others rely primarily on written material. The quality of support and communication between the design team and individual schools affects the level of implementation and teacher support (Bodilly & Berends, 1999).

Teachers in restructuring schools report a preference for frequent training, proximity to the design developers, and the availability of already established sites where they can observe the program in operation and receive hands-on assistance (Smith et al., 1997). Professional development tailored to their specific needs is the most helpful, as are models that provide substantial information about implementation. Teachers especially want clear information about the extent of the changes required, the time that implementation will take in general, and the time required of them personally. They also support models whose design teams help them develop the capacity to envision and plan organizational change (Bodilly, 1996; Levin, 1995).

Specificity of Curriculum and Instructional Strategies

Some CSR models are very prescriptive and provide curricula and assessments (e.g., Success for All), while other models rely more on the school to develop materials that support the philosophy of the reform (e.g., Coalition of Essential Schools). The models which provide more prescriptive materials, curriculum, and assignments have faster implementation rates (Bodilly, 1996, 1998; Stringfield et al., 1996). The most effective professional development involves schoolwide training, facilitators, and extensive training days.

Several factors facilitate the implementation of reform efforts for most teachers, including provision by the designers of a structured curriculum, concrete examples of instructional practices reflecting the reform, and specific, practical mechanisms for achieving the higher standards established as a goal. These aids are even more helpful when they take into consideration the individual needs of the school, its particular population, and the experiences of its teachers (Smith et al., 1997).

While teachers who are not given well-defined guidance in translating the reforms into classroom practice often continue to teach as they always did, not all teachers agree that very specific guides are desirable. Some reform models have been criticized precisely because their prescriptive designs suppress teacher creativity and require an inordinate amount of time for preparation (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden, 1998; Ross et al., 1997). And, indeed, some design teams purposely product nonprescriptive designs because their model intends to focus on general philosophies rather than curriculum. Therefore, a tension exists among reform models between the importance placed on the larger objective or general principles of reform, and teachers' needs and desire for specific, practical guidelines (Heady & Kilgore, 1996).

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